

shed, and the rest of the men tiptoed along the fence — silently, like mice — to go to their friend to see if he was O.K.

THE DANCIN' MACHINE

Some say that Clete's not the man he used to be before his stroke, but you have to watch very closely to make an argument for that point when you see the old boy out on the dance floor....

Clete has made wise and graceful compensation for his game leg by adopting a less freewheeling dance style than he used before his vascular accident — a more contained and tighter mambo, a small-orbit jitterbug with Juanita circling him as he uses his game leg as a pivot, a shuffle-step cha-cha that keeps his center of gravity directly over his pelvis.

Gravity, always a foe, has really been a bugaboo during Clete's recovery, taking advantage of his weakened neural impulses. And when the impulses go beyond weak, when they blink out altogether, gravity is waiting.

Even now, when it appears that Clete has gotten back damned near everything, a sciatic short-circuit will send him to the floor. But Clete compensates; he incorporates the fall into his act — he spins around on the polished linoleum, torques into a headstand and flips back to his feet, glides right back into whatever dance step he and Juanita were involved in, while the edge-of-the-dance-floor on-lookers hoot and howl, and say to each other, "He's a lean, mean, dancin' machine, ain't he?"

VARIATION ON A BLUES THEME, Part 1

The management at the Loma Alta Mall hired a brass band with a female vocalist to perform in front of the fountain outside of The May Company during the Labor Day Sale. The four horn men unpacked their instruments and warmed up, honked and squealed for a minute, and then the vocalist, Evelyn, a very thin middle-aged woman with a gleaming red bouffant, purred into the microphone, "We'd like to do a little blues number for you."

The shoppers milled and window-browsed, power-walked and strolled, ignoring Evelyn and her three freshly-coiffed back-up singers, until the band tooted into the opening number, and Evelyn began to belt out:

I wish I was a queen fish
swimmin' in the deep blue sea,

And the backup singers chanted:

Sea sea sea, sea sea sea.

And Evelyn continued:

I wish I was a queen fish,
swimmin' in the deep blue sea,

Sea sea sea, sea sea sea.

Evelyn eschewed the microphone. Her voice had enough power without artificial amplification. The windows in the book store shimmered. The girls behind the counter in the Taco Bell grimaced and covered their ears. And the crowd of shoppers flowed wide, giving Evelyn and the band plenty of room to perform. The backup singers clapped and swayed, swung their big butts back and forth, and the horn players blew until their veins popped out, and Evelyn threw the microphone into the fountain and bellowed:

'Cause if I was a queen fish
swimmin' in that deep blue sea

(Sea sea sea, sea sea sea)

Then all those pretty king fish
would come and take a bite of me.

(me me me, me me me)

And four-year-old Roy Leahy, son of back-up singer Ruth and tuba player Ellis, took advantage of his parents' intense concentration to their task by escaping, joining the flowing crowd and being carried away by it, like a rolling pebble in an inexorable current.

VARIATION ON A BLUES THEME, Part 2

The management at the mall wanted to appeal to all ages with their choice of entertainment for the Labor Day Sale, so in addition to the lady vocalist and brass band that was playing corny old Gershwin tunes and some revamped blues outside The May Company, they also hired a young techno-punk group to play at the opposite end of the enclosure, in front of the J.C. Penny store....

Nichole flicked her cigarette butt into the planter box, zipped her black leather jacket down to her navel and mum-